

Somerset's Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 4th December 2025



Catcott



Cattle Egret



Starlings



Eurasian Otter

Tour report by Oliver Smart



Naturetrek

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Tour participants: Oliver Smart (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

In a mixture of habitats and crisp winter weather, we enjoyed three days exploring the county of Somerset. With the central focus on watching the Starling murmuration on the Somerset Levels, we also explored the northern coastline around Steart Marshes, deciduous and coniferous woodland, and a variety of wetland marshes and reservoirs. Some of our highlights included wader flocks at sunset, hundreds of thousands of roosting starlings, Otter, Bittern and Marsh Harrier.

Day 1

Monday 1st December

Batch Country House Hotel

The group and leader having convened for an introduction and slideshow at 6.00pm, Oliver set the scene for the next few days in Somerset. There were a mixed range of skills and interests in the group, and high hopes for our stay. The short-range weather forecast for the tour was promising, with light winds, the chance of a light shower or two, and some sunny clear skies. We would be covering a range of habitats, to capture as many of the speciality species that winter in the region as possible.

Day 2

Tuesday 2nd December

Greylake RSPB, Aller Moor, Swell Wood & Steart Marshes

After breakfast at 7.00am, we departed for the Greylake RSPB reserve to start our tour. With conditions favouring us this week, we wanted to maximise time in the field, and to reach a range of diverse habitats. Greylake offers a mixture of reedbed and flooded grassland habitat, and can conjure up many excellent species.

The morning was absolutely stunning, with clear blue skies and not a breath of wind. After finally negotiating the ever-increasing traffic in the area, we arrived and set about spotting some birds. We initially got onto Lapwing, Reed Bunting and Cetti's Warbler, although the latter were certainly skulking. A brief Kingfisher eluded most. At the hides, we enjoyed the vast numbers of waterfowl, including Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler, Mallard and Wigeon. A pair of Marsh Harriers quartered over the reedbeds, causing mayhem from time to time. Snipe continued to pop up, and with such beautiful light it was amazing to see the details on all the birds so well.

After enjoying the sights and sounds of the reserve, we wandered back and headed to West Sedgemoor, where we stood on a bridge overlooking the vast flooded fields stretching out in all directions. We soon heard Common Cranes, and after a few minutes Oliver found a pair foraging in one of the fields. We were later able to get closer for a slightly better view. Skylarks flew overhead, and Roe Deer were spotted too.

At Swell Wood, there was little action in evidence at first, but a little seed was put down, and after some directional 'pishing', we were soon inundated with Blue, Coal and Great Tits, Nuthatches and two Treecreepers, which scoured the trees for food. There was no sign of Marsh Tit, but we didn't have too long to spend here.

After collecting lunch in Bridgwater, we made it to Steart just as a heavy rain shower arrived. We had lost the perfect skies for now, only to see them again later when we made it to the River Parrett. We spent most of our time enjoying the vast numbers of birds from the Quantock hide, including Avocet, Dunlin, Golden Plover and Lapwing. Shelduck, Marsh Harrier, Kestrel and a Redshank all put in appearances too. It was lovely to be able to scan through such a large number of birds.

Our final stop was at the river, where the tide was reaching its high point at 4.11pm, shortly after sunset. The sun appeared from the clouds and bathed the scene in the most glorious warm light. What made it so magical were the moody skies out towards Burnham-on-Sea, which created a decent rainbow; we watched large flocks of murmuring waders (in particular Dunlins and Golden Plovers), flashing white as they veered and banked over the remaining mudflats. It was a very memorable final hour.

Day 3

Wednesday 3rd December

Catcott Lows, Shapwick Heath & Ham Wall

Our morning started at the same time as yesterday, and we headed out to Catcott Lows. The light was simply stunning as we crossed the moors. A low mist was formed over the fields and marshes, and with the sun just breaking the horizon, the orange and yellow hue gave the scene a tranquil feel. We stopped at a bridge to enjoy the beautiful reflections, Mute Swans swimming, and a distant view of Glastonbury Tor.

At Catcott, a large number of Chaffinches, Fieldfares and Redwings were foraging in the trees, and a good number of waterfowl were loafing around on the shallow marsh. We didn't stay too long, and simply enjoyed the scene in front of us.

We relocated to Shapwick Heath and walked the Sweet Track path to the Decoy Hide. We stopped regularly to enjoy small parties of birds, the first including several Redpolls among the very familiar Chiffchaffs, Long-tailed Tits, Bullfinches and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Kingfishers were frequently seen throughout the day, but mostly in flight as they whizzed about at their usual breakneck speed.

After enjoying the replica of the track that the people of Somerset used to cross the swamps nearly 6000 years ago, we dropped into the hide and started scanning through the birds. Our leader picked out a male Ring-necked Duck, a vagrant species from North America. He also spotted a Bittern in flight, and everyone managed to observe it as it flew across and into reedbed cover.

We completed our loop walk, and then had lunch at the Avalon Marshes Centre. A Red Admiral butterfly dropped on to one of the leftover sandwiches, and for the next fifteen minutes proceeded to feed on the chutney with its long proboscis!

Our afternoon wander to Noah's Lake produced many Pintails, Great Crested Grebes, Great Egrets and thousands of Wigeon. We also heard Bearded Reedlings, but they failed to show.

To end the most glorious day, we arrived at Ham Wall and walked beyond Viewing Platform 1, to a lower section alongside the main reedbed. We were hoping to see the Starling murmuration, and we were not to be disappointed.

We were in the perfect position as small groups started to arrive, followed by larger swarms of birds. Then tens of thousands began to arrive and the flock swelled before the first group started to roost, dropping down into the reedbed just in front of us. A couple of Sparrowhawks were seen nipping in and out of the roost, but we could not see whether they had caught anything. More birds arrived and over the following thirty minutes, there must have been many hundreds of thousands of birds inside the reedbed.

Our final sighting was of Saturn! It was glowing brightly on our walk back to the minibus, and Oliver put his scope on it: we could all make out the planet and its distinctive rings.

Day 4

Thursday 4th December

Blagdon Lake, Chew Valley Lake, Stockhill Wood, Cheddar Gorge & Cheddar Reservoir

After two glorious days of weather, we woke to rain and gloomy conditions. It cleared up by the time we departed for Blagdon Lake, however, although it remained colder and overcast for most of the day. From the edge of the lake, we picked up Goldeneye and Egyptian Goose, with plenty of the usual assortment of waterfowl.

We continued to Chew Valley Lake, starting at Herriott's Bridge. It appeared quiet, with fewer birds than expected, but in the distance the low water levels revealed mud, with a number of species along the shoreline. A Kingfisher was spotted along the weir and one client mentioned that he thought he had seen the tail of an animal disappear into the water. Could it be an Otter? Or perhaps it had been a Cormorant, as there are lots of these around too. About twenty minutes later, Oliver made a last scan of the lake and called out "Otter!". A large dog Otter was completely out of the water on some submerged wood, and soon it was swimming across the bay. It disappeared behind the reedbed, so we remained in position just in case. It wasn't long before it reappeared in the channel, and nipped in and out of the reeds before popping its head up alongside the weir directly below us! It vanished back to the channel entrance once again, and then returned a final time, emerging alongside the weir wall and climbing up and disappearing beneath the road.

After this excitement, we headed over to Heron's Green Bank and enjoyed the shallower waters, where there were six Black-tailed Godwits, two Whooper Swans, Grey Wagtail and several thousand ducks. In the distance, several hundred Great Crested Grebes were loafing in the middle of the lake.

We stopped at Woodford Lodge for a mid-morning cuppa and cake, and had a close Green Woodpecker perched in a nearby tree, along with over twenty Cattle Egret in a field with cows. We moved on to Stockhill Wood on the Mendip Hills for our morning wander. We were hoping for Crossbills, but the wood was very quiet, and a couple of rain showers annoyingly suppressed almost all bird activity. Two interesting finds were some Yellow Stagshorn and Jelly Ear (fungi) in the forest.

Navigating a road closure through Cheddar Gorge, we collected our late lunch and arrived at Cheddar Reservoir for our last walk and birding session. It was raining again, so we ate in the minibus before heading out once the skies cleared. Soon, we were scanning the vast numbers of birds on the water. Our leader picked out a few nice birds, including a Black-necked Grebe, and later, once we had moved around the lake a little, a Greater Scaup. It made for a lovely end to the tour, and we made our way back to the hotel to say our goodbyes.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	December 2025		
		2	3	4
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			✓
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓		✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓	✓
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>		✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		✓	
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H	H
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	2		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		✓	
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	✓		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓		
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓		✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓		✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		✓	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>		✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	December 2025		
		2	3	4
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓	✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓		H
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		H	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓		
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓		
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓		
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓		✓
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓		
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓		✓
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	December 2025		
		2	3	4
Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>		✓	
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓
a pipistrelle bat	<i>Pipistrellus sp.</i>		✓	
Western Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			Y

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	December 2025		
		2	3	4
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	